

Reflections on Afghanistan: War is Folly for the Weak on Wisdom and Will

Written by Robert Cassidy

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ROBERT CASSIDY, SEP 12 2021

The results of the South Asia war games over the last several decades became apparent last month. Pakistan and its Taliban creation won. China and Russia tied for second place. Iran came in third. America quit. The Afghans suffered most, and lost. Embarking on wars without knowing who your genuine enemies are and without understanding what the *sine qua non* for the defeat of those enemies might be, is reckless, malfeasant, and negligent in massive ways. It is the height of folly. If senior leaders make decisions to go to war without discussion and without arguments; if they emphasize action and revenge absent analysis and rationality; if they attend to the tactics and violence without thinking through an end to a war that links it to a durable peace, they most likely suffer from hubris, self-delusion, and ignorance. Folly is their fate. Their soldiers, citizens, and allies are destined to trauma, defeat, and tragedy.

The first two quotes below convey realities about policy, strategy, and war that endure over centuries. The theorists who penned them were so extraordinary that their work remains salient still. The third quote holds up over time too. It points to the folly of war when senior civilian and military leaders lack the intellectual capital, analytical capacity, and humility to think through the most important factors pertaining to war and strategy.

The first principle is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest possible sources, and ideally to one alone – Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 617.

A victorious army wins victories before seeking battles; an army destined to defeat fights in the hope of winning – Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, p. 87.

Woodenheadedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts – Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, p. 7.

In view of the shameful and avoidable tragedy that unfolded rapidly in Afghanistan last month, it is important to be clear and candid about who was accountable for this epic failure in U.S. strategy. To be certain, Team America is horrible at strategy in wars for limited aims. All four presidents and their senior national security leaders own this debacle to varying degrees of magnitude and ineptitude. The war in Afghanistan was the only just war of the last 20 years, in terms of the justification for going to war and in the way the coalition mainly endeavored to fight it. It was in theory, the just and righteous war in response to the 9/11 attacks. It could have been, and would have been the good war of the post-9/11 wars, if the U.S., the coalition partners, and the international community had mustered the will and the strategic wisdom to fulfil a post-war moral commitment to Afghanistan. There is a debt, too, that dates back to the U.S. role in the Soviet war. A dearth of strategy and will mainly explain the defeat.

War is folly, certainly, for those who are weak on wisdom and short on will. It is now clear that America cannot be trusted as an ally. It has been clear for the last 20 years that Pakistan is neither an ally or friend, but a ruthless and wily enemy of the U.S. and Afghanistan.

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Just weeks before the 20-year anniversary of 9/11, the richest country on the planet with a population of over 331 million abandoned one of the poorest countries on the planet, an ally, with a population of about 35 million, to the most perfidious country on the planet, Pakistan, an ally in name only, with a population of almost 200 million. “Never forget” metamorphosed, after years of no strategy, arrogance, ignorance, wrong wars, loads of valor, much sacrifice, massive expenditures, intractable stalemate, and Pakistan’s perfidy, into this: forget, abandon, and move on.

The value of the political object, the morality of the war, and the perception of victory or defeat comprise the central logic of war. The political object, and its value, should guide and permeate war. An understanding of the value of the object and a grasp of the enemy’s value of the object are the most important factors in crafting a viable strategy. The value of the political object – dismantling, defeating, and denying al-Qaeda sanctuary – of the Afghan War derived from the horrific losses suffered from al Qaeda’s 9/11 raids. A stable Afghanistan, inhospitable to al Qaeda and other foreign terrorist organizations, the Haqqani network for example, would have supported that object.

But, ending Pakistan’s sanctuary, cultivation, support, and export of Islamist militants was essential to achieve that object. We failed here catastrophically. Stability, security, and the inhospitableness of both Pakistan and Afghanistan to Islamist terrorists were an imperative because the Pashtun belt overlaps both countries across an unrecognized border that cannot be secured.

Pakistan’s calculations and machinations in support of some of the most virulently Islamist terrorists were not a secret. Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence Directorate (ISI) is the world’s number one exporter of Islamist terrorists and nuclear weapons technology. The naivete, illusion, and delusion manifested by senior policymakers and diplomats, especially vis-à-vis Pakistan, account for this failure.

The political object was to ensure that Afghanistan would never become a sanctuary for another 9/11-like attack again. However, the perceived value of the object diminished markedly because 20 years of stalemate saw the costs of this war, in magnitude and duration, exceed the value of persevering with a modest number of advisors and funds, to most of the U.S public and to the president.

The single worst attack against the U.S. homeland is now 20 years in the past. The Islamist terrorists who perpetrated that egregious assault, planned, recruited, and directed it from Afghanistan with the benefit of sanctuary that Pakistan and its Taliban progeny provided. When the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, that was then the highwater mark of Pakistan’s foreign and security policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence Directorate’s number one export is terrorism and the only flavor is Islamist. The Saudis’ decades long funding, export and proselytization of its own Wahhabi-Salafi creed to Pakistan and Afghanistan, to be sure, also played a role in radicalizing Pakistan and its Taliban creation.

But, the avoidable, tragic, and shameful abandonment of Afghanistan to Pakistan and its Taliban proxies last month marked a new high-water mark for Pakistan’s security elites. Pakistan, a major non-NATO ally of America and a beneficiary of tens of billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars, brought about our biggest defeat since the Vietnam War. It pulled this off through perfidy and protraction.

Pakistan had no small assistance from U.S. strategic malfeasance and ineptitude. Ultimately, a host of civilian and military leaders at the strategic and operation levels are responsible for the American defeat in Afghanistan. The Pollyanna problem among American generals certainly contributed in a major way. The U.S. proclivity for tactics over strategy also had a big part. To be sure, the soldiers and Marines who did most of the fighting and dying for America performed with valor and skill in the main.

This article’s main purpose is to elucidate what the four presidential administrations who oversaw the war in Afghanistan were responsible and accountable for in terms of policy and strategy miscalculations and missteps. Since this is an article, and not a book, it will necessarily focus on the most important factors in strategy and war: the political object and the will that derives from the value of that object; the critical thinking and the wisdom about strategy of the senior policymakers in those administrations.

Reflections on Afghanistan: War is Folly for the Weak on Wisdom and Will

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Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the *value of this object* must determine the *sacrifices* to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow – Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 92.

George W. Bush: Strong of Will and Weak on Wisdom

Whether George W. Bush was the worst president in American history will long be debated, but his decision to invade Iraq is easily the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president – Jean Edward Smith, *Bush*, p. 603.

Will derives from and relates to the political object and its value. In the months and years immediately following the 9/11 attacks, the value of the object was high and there was strong support in the U.S. and among America's friends and allies to wage war against al Qaeda and its supporters. But, since fear, guilt, hubris, and ignorance permeated Bush's inner circle of decisionmakers and ideologues, it never crafted a strategy for Afghanistan. Very few in that administration knew anything about Afghanistan. Bush and his senior leaders acted before they analyzed; they overreached before they understood.

Bush's team was fraught with illusions and paradoxes. The main illusion was that President George W. Bush brought into office with him a talented national security team. The reality was that he chose one of the most inept and dysfunctional national security teams in history. A fatal contradiction that derived from the Bush League's risible nescience was that it opted to expand the war against al Qaeda and its supporters into a wide-reaching global war of regime change while at the same time eschewing post-combat stability and state building efforts in Afghanistan, the origin of 9/11.

It strained credulity then and it accounts for a large part of the catastrophic abandonment and defeat in Afghanistan now. The willful malfeasance that George W. Bush and his closest advisors committed (torture, intensified renditions, black sites, Bagram, Guantanamo, the colossally stupid Iraq invasion, Abu Ghraib) and the wisdom they omitted (reason, thinking, strategy, moral rectitude, and state recovery for Afghanistan to address the root causes) brought about massive reverses for U.S. national security interests generally and for stability in Afghanistan specifically.

The Bush administration found the very idea of rebuilding Afghanistan (nation-building was a reviled term in the Rumsfeld Pentagon) abhorrent and instead targeted individual senior al-Qaeda leaders and terrorists for killing and capturing. For at least the first six years in Afghanistan, the U.S. depended too heavily on warlords, accommodated unscrupulous Afghan leaders, used air power indiscriminately, and killed too many non-combatants. Predatory warlords, venal police, massive corruption from the influx of money, night raids, and civilian casualties combined, to aggrieve Afghans. All of this unjustly wronged many Afghans and catalyzed support among a number of Pashtun Afghans for the revival of the Taliban.

To make things much, much, worse, Team Bush committed gross strategic malfeasance by choosing to invade Iraq out of ignorance and arrogance, only to create a quagmire. Though completely unrelated to the 9/11 attacks from Afghanistan, the debacle in Iraq came to fuel support for the Taliban's regeneration in Afghanistan; it also animated thousands of jihadists around the world. A dozen or so senior principals and deputies in that regime expended much more time and energy fabricating and propagating the arguments to start an unnecessary and unjust war in Iraq, than they devoted to the war in Afghanistan. Pakistan and its Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) were calculating and scheming as a consequence. They decided to increase and accelerate their regeneration of the Taliban insurgency partly as a consequence of America's diversion to Iraq.

Afghanistan was relegated to a secondary and poorly resourced effort for the U.S., with a very limited number of special operations and conventional forces conducting strikes and raids to kill or capture key leaders. There were too few troops and too little resources committed to address the challenges of stabilizing the country. During the middle of the last decade when the U.S. was mired in Iraq, security gaps developed in the east and south of Afghanistan.

Reflections on Afghanistan: War is Folly for the Weak on Wisdom and Will

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Pakistan filled those gaps with two of its preferred exports, and Islamist surrogates, the Taliban and the Haqqani network. The U.S. leadership was then also unwilling or unable to either understand, or coerce or compel, the real enemies who had directly or indirectly aided and abetted the Taliban regime and its al-Qaeda brethren in Afghanistan. Physical sanctuary, material, recruits, funds, and ideology flowed from Pakistan while funds and ideology from Saudi Arabia and other sponsors helped mobilize insurgents and terrorists in South Asia for decades. Pakistan continued to provide all of the above means of support to the Taliban and other militants after the Taliban fled to Pakistan in late 2001 and early 2002.

It was Bush, the commander in chief, who saw no need for rigorous debate among his war council. Not on the advisability and necessity of invading Iraq. Not on the composition of the invasion force. Not on what should follow the invasion – Robert Draper, *To Start a War*, p. 401.

Barack Obama: Stronger on Wisdom and Weaker on Will

President Barak Obama had campaigned to get out of the Iraq war and to double down on efforts to turn around the faltering war in Afghanistan. His national security lieutenants exhibited more suppleness of mind and humility in behavior than their predecessors. They revisited the logic and strategic imperatives of the protracted stalemate in Afghanistan. His advisors read books about the Vietnam War. They discussed, argued, and counterargued the merits of counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism. In the end, the will of the Obama administration was modest even though its senior members seemed to bring better capacity for strategic wisdom and critical analysis to the war.

This president was willing to make an effort to keep his campaign promise to invest in the war in Afghanistan. However, President Obama's team did not have the unity, inter-agency harmony, or genuine desire to compel Pakistan to stop providing sanctuary and support to the Taliban. The senior people in that administration who were interlocutors to Pakistan succumbed to the ISI narratives which warned if the U.S. pushed them too hard, the really scary Islamists would take over Pakistan, along with its nuclear weapons. That administration valued the stability of Pakistan and the security of its strategic weapons more than Afghanistan. To its credit, though, the Obama team was also willing to accept great risk in undertaking the raid that killed bin Laden. It simply lacked the will to fully confront and alter Pakistan's strategic malice.

The Obama administration tried to focus resources on Afghanistan with a measured and prudent approach to strategy. It undertook a laudable but insufficient effort to align means to the political object by crafting a theory of strategic victory for Afghanistan with the surge that began in 2009. But Pakistan's malign yet predictable strategic conduct, coupled with an American inability to muster the creativity, resources and coercive measures to curb Pakistan's pathological proclivities, accounted for the gap between the theory and the practice.

Following years of a limited number of troops conducting tactical strikes and raids, the Obama administration's theory of strategy and operational surge in Afghanistan made discernible operational gains but these were fleeting because the strategy failed to modify, reduce, or stop the *sine qua non* for victory in Afghanistan. Almost every U.S. DOD report on progress in Afghanistan since 2008 explicitly stated that Pakistan's sanctuary and support prevented the defeat of the Taliban. To defeat the Taliban and put an end to the stalemate, America and its real allies needed to think creatively and act forcefully enough to stop Pakistan's support and sanctuary for the Islamist insurgency and other terrorists that Pakistan's ISI supported and still supports.

Donald Trump: Weak of Will and Weak on Wisdom

In one sense, people should be grateful that the 45th president and his team did not do more damage to America's national security interests. This is partly attributable to a few senior advisors and principals who could constrain the president's worst proclivities and impulses. This guy came into office wanting to get out of Afghanistan altogether.

The president himself had little will or interest in continuing the war in Afghanistan but for the first two years he heeded the counsel of his secretary of defense and national security advisor. From the beginning of that administration's tenure in 2017, the executive branch hemmed and hawed in major ways a number of times. His

Reflections on Afghanistan: War is Folly for the Weak on Wisdom and Will

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team did craft a revised strategy with an ostensible commitment to win in Afghanistan. In announcing this strategy, the president declared, "Our troops will fight to win. We will fight to win. From now on, victory will have a clear definition. Terrorists take heed: America will never let up until you are dealt a lasting defeat."

An increase of about 3,500 U.S. forces to a total of over 14,000 to advise and assist the Afghan security forces attended this renewed but fleeting commitment to turn the war around. Beyond the imperative to find a regional solution that would reduce external support for the Taliban, the approach re-aligned the increase in troops to advise more tactical units, to continue to double the Afghan special security forces and to expand the Afghan air force, all toward the aim of overmatching the Taliban in the fighting. The idea was that this increased capacity could build military pressure and operational momentum against the Taliban to convince them to reconcile with the Afghan government. Pressure on Pakistan would curb the effects of sanctuary, in theory.

Although the commander in chief exhibited little strategic wisdom and no will to continue the war, his predilections did not predominate until most of the adults were gone in late 2018 after he fired his only capable defense secretary and decent national security advisor. Once they were gone, the 45th president was far less restrained and sound in his action and decisions. He selected and empowered Zai Khalilzad to negotiate an end to the war with a peace agreement that saw a hasty extraction from Afghanistan for the U.S., but the terms of the agreement were plainly incongruous and disingenuous because the negotiations excluded the Afghan government and security forces America had been supporting, while stipulating that all U.S./NATO forces had to withdraw before the Taliban would negotiate with the Afghan government. It strained credulity to argue that no one in the administration knew that this represented an abandonment of Afghanistan. Worse still, during the last two years of the war, the 45th president authorized the theater commander to use air power more liberally during the very periods that human intelligence capacity was diminishing. Civilian casualties spiked again beginning in 2019 and the Taliban's recruits increased.

Joe Biden: Weak of Will and Modest on Wisdom

The Biden team clearly seems to have entered office already decided to get out of Afghanistan, and committed to go with the risibly unenforceable peace agreement signed by the previous, and most horrid administration in American history. It was a circus show and the terms that 45 and Khalilzad agreed to signaled the abandonment of Afghanistan. To be sure, many citizens of the United States, including myself, support the advent of team Biden. A sense of decency has supplanted the machinations of an evil miscreant. Americans should be grateful for what this administration is advocating for infrastructure and the plight of ordinary people. Also, to be sure, the decision to end the twenty-year war in Afghanistan was both courageous and laudable.

However, the current president's immodest obduracy and modest strategic wisdom, combined with what seems to be a weak national security team, brought about a withdrawal from Afghanistan that turned into an ignominious retreat, a debacle, and a tragedy for all those who perished at the airport and for those whom America abandoned. The current president decided in 2008-2009, when he was a senator and then became vice president, that Afghanistan was not worth the effort. His relationship with Karzai had soured beyond repair and he strongly argued against the surge during the reassessment among Obama's principals. Those arguing for the surge in Afghanistan won the debate in 2009. Biden lost. His obduracy persisted.

To be fair, some of Biden's national security team argued against a complete withdrawal. Surely, they explained that a small footprint of special and conventional forces advisors and support could sustain the Afghan special security forces, air force, and conventional forces, so those Afghan forces would continue to fight and resupply. This was a modest and affordable cost, under \$40 billion per year, to backstop a twenty-year investment and effort where many served and sacrificed. Since 2014, the Afghans were in the lead for security and their forces were doing the preponderance of fighting and dying. Many more Afghan civilians and soldiers had died in the war than American or coalition members had.

The president had dug in before inauguration. And, few resisted vehemently. No one resigned. A more judicious approach, one that brooked the facts on the ground and the realities in the South Asia region, might have been to

Reflections on Afghanistan: War is Folly for the Weak on Wisdom and Will

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hold with, or increase the advisors from 2,500 to 5,000 or 8,500, to sustain the most capable Afghan security forces and renegotiate the end of the war. His team could have then worked an agreement that included the Afghan government it supported and provided terms to allow the U.S., the Coalition, and its Afghan partners to credibly enforce the pledges of the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and their Pakistani benefactors to comply with the terms. Instead, the current team accepted in toto an agreement that was not worth the paper it was written on. Hope is not a viable method to enforce terms with enemies who have only exhibited mendacity and lethal treachery.

Conclusion

The history of military conflict in Afghanistan [has] been one of initial success, followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure. We're not going to repeat that mistake – George W. Bush, Virginia Military Institute, April 2002.

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril – Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, p. 84.

No one starts a war — or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so — without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its purpose; the latter its operational objective – Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 579.

Learning from experience is a faculty almost never practiced – Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, p. 383.

Afghanistan is not the graveyard of empires. Pakistan's support of Islamists like the Taliban and the Haqqani clan precluded a successful outcome. America and its penchant for action and tactics over analysis and strategic wisdom, make it the graveyard of strategy. The list of American failures in far-away wars with limited objects is not a short one. The main difficulty with limited-war strategy for America stems from a propensity for focusing on the means instead of thinking through the strategic logic that aligns the means to the political objects. This predilection poses a challenge for America's strategy in limited wars because the values of the political objects are more modest for this country than those of insurgents and their external enablers. The worth of a win in Afghanistan also varied with the magnitude and duration of the violence.

Afghanistan is not Vietnam, either, although the images of the poorly thought through and maladroitly executed U.S. retreat from Afghanistan in August do harken to images of Saigon's fall at the end of April in 1975.

Yet, there were similar insurmountable factors in the strategic logic of both wars. North Vietnam and the Viet Cong saw very high value in their object of an independent and unified Vietnam. They were willing to pay almost any cost to achieve it. They also showed superior strategic savvy. Fighting a war of attrition was smart and it brought victory. Pakistan and its Taliban allies also ascribed a higher value to their object of Taliban rule in an Afghanistan inhospitable to India. The real and exaggerated threats that Pakistan's security elites perceive about Indian influence in Afghanistan account for their will to protract and escalate the war, and made attrition a winning model. The Taliban and their Pakistani advisors were willing to pay more. In both cases, along with Somalia in the 1990s, a prolonged war of attrition was a war-losing approach for the U.S. Few presidents wanted to explain the why and to what end well enough for most Americans to understand what was at stake. Americans did not want or care about an Afghanistan inhospitable to al Qaeda and other foreign terrorists nearly as much as their enemies in Pakistan wanted a Taliban theocracy hospitable to Islamists and beholden to the ISI.

In the end, the major factors that explain the West's failure in Afghanistan were the absence of strategy, the lack of wisdom and will to stop the key enemy (Pakistan) from supporting the Taliban and other Islamist terrorists, and the invasion of Iraq. Harmful consequences at the operational and tactical levels that derived from these major factors were the revival of hated warlords, massive increases in corruption and criminal patronage, venal and predatory local politicians and police, too many instances of civilian casualties because of a dearth of security forces, and the full regeneration of the Taliban as a consequence of all of the above.

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